

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT INSTANT RUNOFF VOTING

What Is IRV?

Instant Runoff Voting (“IRV”) is an election system in which voters cast their preferences, ranking candidates “1,” “2,” “3,” etc.

Who Uses IRV?

IRV is used on the municipal, state, and national level in governments around the world, as well as by non-governmental organizations and corporations.

Local and state governments in U.S. currently using IRV:

- San Francisco *
- Burlington, VT *
- Takoma Park, MD *
- Louisiana (for overseas absentee ballots)
- South Carolina (for overseas absentee ballots)
- Arkansas (for overseas absentee ballots)
- North Carolina (for overseas absentee ballots)
- Illinois (for overseas absentee ballots)
- Vermont (for overseas absentee ballots)

Local governments in U.S. which have approved IRV and are now implementing it:

- Minneapolis, MN *
- Oakland, CA *
- Sarasota, FL
- Hendersonville, NC
- Cary, NC *
- Pierce County, WA *
- Berkeley, CA
- Ferndale, MI

* Indicates use for the mayoral election AS WELL AS city council/county commission elections.

Local governments in U.S. which approved charter amendments which provide IRV as an option:

- Vancouver, WA
- Santa Clara County, CA
- San Leandro, CA

It is also used around the world. For example, it is used to elect the President of Ireland, the President of India, the national legislature of Australia, and the Mayor of London.

Either IRV or a related form of “proportional voting” or “choice voting” is used at the national level in virtually every industrialized democracy in the world except for Britain and the U.S., where it has been absent for purely historical reasons (i.e., the election systems were set up before these alternative systems were invented).

How does IRV work?

The voter ranks his/her candidates in order of preference—"1," "2," "3," etc. Voters can rank as many or as few candidates as they wish.

If any candidate gets a majority of the 1st-place votes, that candidate wins. If not, the candidate with the fewest 1st-place votes is eliminated. 1st-place votes for that candidate are then redistributed to the remaining candidates based on the 2nd-place votes.

If there is now a candidate with a majority, he/she wins. If not, the next lowest candidate is eliminated, the votes are redistributed as before. The process continues until some candidate gets a majority of the vote and is declared the winner.

With inexpensive, off-the-shelf computer programs, this counting process can be completed in a matter of hours for most cities.

Why Use IRV?

* If you are going to do runoffs anyway (like we do with City Council districts), this is

+*quicker*

+*cheaper* (you pay for one election, not two) and

+*has better voter turnout* (because turnout always drops big-time in the second, 'runoff' election)

**IRV solves the "spoiler problem."* It avoids outcomes in which a candidate disliked by the lion's share of voters squeaks by to victory.

**IRV elects consensus candidates* with majority support and a broad base of support.

**IRV encourages positive campaigning.* Candidates want to be the first choice of their base and the second choice of their opponents' base. Negative campaigning which polarizes the electorate will not help them win.

**IRV makes elections more competitive.* It gives lesser-known, lesser-funded candidates a chance. Voters who might otherwise not vote for such a candidate for fear of "throwing away their vote" can vote for the "little guy" for first-place, but go with a more established candidate for second-place, without fear of throwing the election to a candidate they really detest. (E.g., you can vote for Nader without helping Bush.)

*Because it makes elections more competitive, *it helps increase voter turnout.*

What Success Has IRV Had In Recent Years?

Out of the last 12 cities and counties to vote on IRV, 11 won.

The votes include:

- 2007 votes on implementing IRV
 - Aspen, CO -- 77%
 - Sarasota, FL - 78%
 - Pierce County, WA - 67% to keep IRV on track for 2008 implementation
 - Clallam Coujnty, WA - 45% (first defeat in years)
 - plus, 91% voted to implement IRV ballots for overseas voters in Springfield, IL
- 2006 votes
 - Minneapolis- 65%
 - Oakland - 69%
 - Pierce County - 53%
- 2005 votes
 - Burlington, VT - 64%
 - Takoma Park, MD - 84%
- 2004
 - Berkeley, CA - 72%
 - Ferndale, MI - 68%
- 2002 votes
 - San Francisco, CA - 55%

What Have Voters Said About Their Voting Experience With IRV?

Cities like Cary, NC, Hendersonville, NC, Burlington, VT, and San Francisco did academic-led exit polls about voter attitudes. In every case more than two out of three voters supported IRV, and overwhelmingly found it easy to use.